

TEACHER LEADERSHIP: OVERCOMING 'I AM JUST A TEACHER' SYNDROME

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A well-developed literature base exists and continues to grow on the topic of teacher leadership; however, it remains largely an academic topic and even though inroads have been made, teacher leadership remains more a concept than an actuality. Teachers have always been leaders, but there is little evidence that a focused, collaborative movement exists in public schools designed to promote and support widespread teacher leadership in the profession. We know that sustained, effective school leadership strengthens student achievement especially when coupled with a supportive school climate that encourages collaboration and risk-taking; teachers and principals alike have reciprocal roles in building and sharing leadership. Unless and until the concept of teacher leadership is embraced and developed, "just a teacher" will remain the prevailing habit of mind in the nation's schools.

Eighteen Master of Education students sat in a class titled "Teacher Leadership" pondering how they could possibly be teacher leaders. One offered, "But my principal is our leader. He leads. I follow." Another said, "Teacher leadership is just a theory, I believe. It does not exist in real life—at least not in my school." A third said, "I think I have some leadership qualities, but I am just a teacher."

"I am just a teacher." This mantra is embraced by legions of teachers across the land. Principals lead; teachers follow. And so it goes. The guiding principles of teacher leadership date to antiquity and received renewed interest in the twentieth century. Over 60 years ago, Bahn (1947) charged administrators with the task of "exploring abilities, releasing creative powers, tapping experiences, and, consequently, developing the quality of teacher leadership" (p. 155). In addition, numerous

reform efforts in the 1980s and 1990s recommended "teacher leadership" as a mechanism for widespread reform. Wasley (1991), too, almost two decades ago, led a clarion call for the necessity of teacher leadership and shared decision-making in school improvement. She rightly acknowledged, however, that the body of literature was absent in supporting this concept. Twenty years later, a body of literature has been developed and continues to grow, yet it is poorly understood and only intermittently practiced where it counts—in schools. Despite the many calls for teacher leadership in the literature over the years, the message has not reached teachers themselves in any large measure. School improvement ultimately will depend on teacher leadership—a factor largely untapped in schools today.

Principal leadership and teacher leadership

Sustained, effective school leadership substantially strengthens student achievement (Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2004) as does a positive school climate (Heck, 2000). Having engaged in numerous school reform efforts over the years, it is clear that traditional, top down leadership falls short of effecting the systemic, meaningful reform necessary to meet the needs of students in the new and challenging world they will face (Copland, 2003).

The principal has position, power, authority, and the responsibility of accountability for the total school program. However, the prevailing, role-bound model in schools depicting the principal as having the requisite set of leadership skills and teachers being passive recipients of directives or prescribed professional development must be examined. Both principal and teachers have important and reciprocal roles in the overall leadership quotient of a school, but to do so, an open and equitable relationship must be in place. Leadership at its best takes place in the interactions between people in the school and the situations they face; therefore for leadership to be effective, it must be shared or distributed (Gronn, 2000; Hargreaves & Fink, 2006); this takes certain leadership dispositions on both the part of the principal and the teachers.

Using Occam's razor, leadership can be succinctly defined as "making happen what you believe in" (Barth, 2001). Considering this, leadership can no longer equate exclusively with the man or woman in the principal's office and the tendency to focus

on the managerial aspects of the job. Bolman and Deal (2003) assert:

If an organization is overmanaged but underled, it eventually loses any sense of spirit or purpose. ...The challenges of modern organizations require the objective perspective of managers as well as the brilliant flashes of vision wise leadership provides. (p. xvi)

So, in this age of accountability where no one person can possibly be omniscient, a "wise" principal will honor and support a distributed form of leadership, a philosophy put in action where others in the building are trusted and expected to bear the burden and pleasure of leadership, which far surpasses a few "brilliant flashes of vision."

To be clear, distributing or sharing leadership is not delegating responsibility. Historically this has entailed principals wooing teachers into accepting a certain professional responsibility or simply assigning a task. Likewise, it is not simply garnering extra help or providing a second set of hands for the principal. Teacher leadership rises from within the teaching ranks and expresses itself in a myriad of ways for the betterment of students, specifically, and school in general. Effective leadership can and should be infused among teachers. The principal, to be fully effective, must understand the importance and benefit of sharing leadership for without this understanding to support and foster teacher leadership, little good will come. According to Anderson (2004), a key purpose of leadership is "set[ing] directions and influence[ing] others to move in those

directions" (p. 100), so principal leadership coupled with teacher leadership is a logical, rational, and productive model for school improvement. If it can be agreed upon that the spate of recent reform efforts has been largely ineffective, maintaining a culture where "just a teacher" states of mind prevail is a terrible waste of expertise, energy, and influence in the school community.

Taking the reins

Confidence is at the heart of any leadership role. Principals must have confidence in their own leadership skills to encourage and support leadership within the teaching ranks. Teachers, similarly, must have or build confidence in extant leadership skills they embody and seek ways to use them to strengthen their own professional practice. For the teacher, there are numerous formal and informal avenues to express leadership. The most familiar are the traditional, formal, and hierarchical roles in a school which may include departmental or grade level chair, subject area supervisor, mentor, or various instructional coaching roles. These important positions come replete with a job description and formal expectations; they also typically are associated with release time or monetary compensation. The other, more informal and emergent, type of teacher leadership runs much deeper, is self-generated, and holds the promise of serving as a mechanism for continual professional learning and innovation in the school.

Teacher leadership, in its truest sense, involves those informal aspects of leader-

ship, where a teacher sees a need or identifies a problem and takes the reins to address it within his or her means. Danielson (2007) refers to these elements of leadership as "emerg[ing] spontaneously and organically from the teacher ranks" (p. 16). Because teachers are indispensable in improving student achievement (Gabriel, 2005), this "emergence" cannot and will not occur unless and until teachers recognize their own leadership potential and develop the confidence and skills to be effective teacher leaders. In doing so, teachers will come to realize that taking responsibility for their own professional learning and collaborating meaningfully with and among colleagues not only impacts their personal effectiveness in a school, but can produce results in the classroom nothing short of miraculous.

Awareness of leadership potential

No Child Left Behind requires that teachers be "highly qualified" in one or more content areas when they enter their first classroom. "Highly qualified" usually translates as "minimally qualified" in most states with certificate holders holding only a bachelor's degree and demonstrating competency on a Praxis or Praxis-type test. Armed with a quiver of ideas and the courage of their convictions, novice teachers often enter a profession woefully underprepared for the rigors of today's classroom. Teaching is a flat profession. Unless a teacher wants to be a principal or guidance counselor, he or she will spend a career in the classroom with first-year teachers and 30-year veterans essentially carrying out the same functions.

Teachers have no trouble visioning themselves as leaders in their communities, churches, or other venues, but often tend to have great difficulty identifying themselves as leaders in their schools; the matter lies chiefly in whether or not teachers are willing to assume the role of “teacher leader.” Becoming a teacher leader involves the breaking of stereotypical isolation familiar to most teachers. Collaborating among teachers is rare in the depth required to produce meaningful school improvement. It means eschewing what Tocqueville (1996) called *rugged individualism*—a principle revered as “the American way”—to a culture where interdependence is valued and a collection of individual teachers melds into a community of learners with shared purposes, goals, and understandings (Harris, 2002).

When educators focus on who is the leader and *who* are the followers, only one person can contribute significantly to the overall well-being of the school. Teachers in this scenario are relegated to a sub-professional category likened much to baby birds in the nest that await as their mother goes to get a worm, then returns to the nest to feed them. Teachers need to get their own “worms,” but knowing what to search for and where complicate the scenario. In the prevailing leadership model, teachers do not see themselves as meaningful contributors which reinforces the “just a teacher” mentality. Lambert (2003) discusses the importance of teachers owning a sense of purpose in their profession which elevates them into leadership as they must define their own instructional problems and seek ways to remedy them. This

is a matter of awareness for teachers as they come to see that they have more control and influence over their destiny than they give themselves credit for and that this control can result in purposeful agency and positive results for students. Teacher leadership is typically not compensated leadership and certainly generates more work for a teacher, but this is true of most acts of professionalism and empowerment. Therefore, teacher leadership capacity in any school building is a melding of support and encouragement by the principal and the willingness of teachers to impact their own professional vocation.

Change is good

Nothing is permanent except change. These prophetic words of Heraclitus, Greek philosopher who lived around 500 BC, still ring true. Yet change is not comfortable for most teachers who have been asked to make changes in their teaching and other areas of their professional lives time and time again, most of which have yielded few measurable improvements. It is not surprising that teachers may resist a renewed call for teacher leadership thinking, and rightfully so, that this is simply a new way to extract more work from them—and unpaid work at that. Familiar with the aforementioned practice of *delegating*, teachers may see *teacher leadership* simply as “business as usual” with a new appellation. Teachers are exhausted with the many and varied reform efforts they have experienced knowing that before any new program or philosophy is firmly in place, another will replace it resulting, in the minds of many, in equal-

ly dismal results. Most reforms are done to teachers and are externally imposed; teacher leadership is a practice emanating *from* and *with* teachers and, due to this key difference, can be exquisitely tailored to teachers' needs and practice.

The profession of teaching is highly bureaucratic and often crippled by the ponderous influence of inertia. When reform efforts present themselves, the new roles are often "simply appended to a flat, compartmentalized school structure" (Johnson & Donaldson, 2007, p. 10) and despite being rallied to a point by the novelty of the reform *du jour*, we toy, we tinker, and the results remain much the same.

Our own worst enemy

Identifying and overcoming barriers is an essential component in encouraging and supporting teachers in their quest to share leadership. Leadership, according to Harris (2003), is an "interactive process of sense-making and creation of meaning that is continuously engaged in by organizational members" (p. 314) and as such, impact the four dimensions of teacher leadership as suggested by Day and Harris (2003). These include: 1) strengthening classroom practice; 2) encouraging teacher ownership in the change process; 3) assuming the mantle of teacher expert; and 4) engaging in collegiality for mutual learning. These facets are not without direct and corollary challenges. Collinson (2004) explains that exemplary teachers "seek, accept, or create leadership roles" (p. 383), but identifying exemplary teachers and harnessing or directing the expression of leadership can be problematic.

The principal is the lynchpin in creating and supporting a school climate in which teacher leadership can flourish. Climate is related to those shared values, interpretations of social and academic activities, and commonly held definitions of purpose (Kottkamp, 1984). As discussed earlier, if leadership remains vested in one person, the principal, teacher leadership is unlikely to develop in any great measure. It is certainly possible for teachers to engage in professional learning, be collegial, and work in ways to strengthen practice, but if the principal is resistant or unwilling to share leadership, it is highly unlikely the strivings of individual teachers will reach the critical mass necessary to impact the school as a whole.

However, even with the most supportive and enlightened principal, pitfalls abound. As an example, teachers are often suspicious of other teachers selected to spearhead tasks needed for the effective running of a school. Despite being identified due to their being "competent, credible, and approachable" (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009, p. 14), weaker teachers often ascribe the selection of others to favoritism, not capability. Whereas often appreciated by those selected, if for no other reason than to vary responsibilities, others harbor resentment and can easily thwart the best intentions of their colleagues. Keeping in mind that naysayers may not have any interest in being a mentor, coach, or any other permutation of leadership, but they can be bitter towards others who do. Kelley, Thornton, and Daugherty (2005) suggest that teachers desire consistent treatment, yet do not fully

appreciate that “differential treatment is needed based on the developmental level of the teacher or the task in question” (p. 23).

Teachers may also openly question why one person was asked to assume leadership roles and others not. Foot-dragging, open opposition to change, the stifling of discussion or problem-solving, or outright subterfuge are common strategies to suppress or subjugate the change process. Collegiality, although one of the primary hallmarks and benefits of teacher leadership, may be met with resistance, too, as, despite the debilitation of isolation, some teachers find comfort nestled in their own classrooms and feel threatened by the expertise or actions of others. These teachers often lack the requisite skills, attitudes, and dispositions required to be a teacher leader and although every school building has individuals who meet this description, they cannot be allowed to thwart the process. Colonial patriot Thomas Paine’s (1737-1809) truism, *Either lead, follow, or get out of the way* could not be more applicable in contemporary American education. We are, very often, our own worst enemies regarding change and school improvement. Obstructionists must be recognized and, if after every attempt has been made to secure their involvement fails, they need to be stepped over by those willing to lead.

Fostering teacher leadership

Teacher leadership can only flourish in a school culture that embraces “an optimistic and rigorous educational mission, and it must do so in an environment of respect and a culture of hard work and suc-

cess” (Danielson, 2006, p. 126). This is no small consideration and must be grappled with first and foremost particularly in situations where faculty members cannot ascribe this description to their school. Vision, desire, and support are all necessary in shaping and inspiring teacher leaders. However, none of this is important if no plan is in place. Shared leadership provides coherence, stability, and is essential for innovation (Printy & Marks, 2006). To move schools in this direction, a plan to develop teacher leaders is necessary. These plans would be as idiosyncratic as the schools in which they were carried out, but several basic and common strategies must be addressed as follows:

Consideration One: An important consideration in cultivating teacher leaders involves the hiring of new teachers. The interview process provides an ideal opportunity to discuss the importance and merits of teacher leadership especially when a candidate’s exposure to this concept may vary widely depending on the emphasis placed on it in their collegiate certification program. Every new hire provides an opportunity to increase leadership strength in a school building. “Autonomy need and achievement motivation consistently distinguish leaders from non-leaders...,” according to Rogers (2005, p. 629). Knowing this, school administrators can design questions or scenarios to query prospective teachers in determining if indicators of these two criteria are present in an individual. Coupled with hiring practices is a carefully crafted induction program which highlights and reinforces the roles and opportunities for teacher leadership.

Consideration Two: Equally important, many schools have an established faculty having little turnover on a year-to-year basis. It is in these seasoned educators that the work of having them see themselves as leaders—and conversely, seeing one another as leaders, is critical. This of course requires a paradigm shift and intentional acts focused on *the leader within* specifically aimed at the art and craft of learning, teaching, and collaboration. Identifying specific, measurable goals and approaches to achieve them is imperative in honoring teacher voice, empowerment, and ownership of the school. *Owners* take care of their “property” and seek to improve it! Similarly, there must be an ongoing commitment to professional inquiry where continuous personal and professional improvement is considered a point of pride and professional expectation.

Consideration Three: Model learning and collegiality. Learning is a social activity. Strengthening one’s knowledge-base provides an excellent and non-threatening activity to build relationships with others on the faculty. Learning inspires confidence and the willingness to take risks in improving practice—even if in the smallest, most tentative steps at first. Professional development is the cornerstone of improving practice and is essential to teacher growth, expertise, and skill development. It would be unimaginable to select a physician who does not study the latest medical or surgical advances or retain an attorney who does not keep abreast of current case law. Yet, many teachers spend an entire career devoid of meaningful, purposeful professional development with far

too few recognizing their obligation to seek and engage in self-identified professional learning. Stigler and Hiebert (2000) assert that schools are places for teachers to learn, but that this is a concept almost lost in contemporary American schools. Teachers need high-quality, sustained professional development throughout their careers. Unfortunately, only 12–27% of teachers in 2000 believed that the professional development provided by their districts actually improved their teaching (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2001). If district-provided professional development is inadequate in promoting student achievement (Lee 2004/2005), it becomes vital that teachers at every level of experience take a proactive role in their own continuous improvement (Kent, 2004).

Closing thoughts

Teachers have always been leaders, but there is little evidence that a focused, collaborative movement exists in public schools designed to promote and support widespread teacher leadership in the profession. Unless the concept of teacher leadership is embraced by the schools, *just a teacher* will remain the prevailing habit of mind in the nation’s schools.

Educators must decide who they are and how they want to be perceived in their schools and in their profession. Becoming a principal or teacher leader demands a commitment to change and grow as a person and as an educator (Helterbran, 2008a). Talk of career ladders, differentiated pay scales, master teacher designations, advanced certifications, and other incentive-based motivators for teachers abound

with a goal to boost professionalism and leadership skills. However, none of this will matter unless there is a large-scale groundswell of intentional effort on the part of educators and teacher leadership will continue to be expressed only in fits and starts and schools will continue to achieve at current rates.

Educators are among the hardest workers in America. There is little doubt that American teachers are committed to the children of the land. However, teaching is the only profession where novice practitioners start anew every generation and are somehow expected to know how to teach expertly when entering their first classrooms. In addition, little preparatory and ongoing professional development (Helterbran, 2008b) is offered and goals tend to shift and change with political caprice. The frustration and exhaustion experienced by our nation's teachers is palpable.

As a profession, we seem to still be looking for that magic potion as a solution for all that ails education—that final bandwagon that we are so well-exercised in hopping on; it does not exist. However, what does exist is a yearning by teachers to be valued, relevant, and involved professionals. For this to occur, there needs to be a renewed effort to work and learn collaboratively with the knowledge that with a goal, a plan, and the perseverance to take small, incremental steps toward an ideal leadership arrangement where principals and teachers share the yoke of leadership. That first step requires the courage to ask tough questions of ourselves and our colleagues in purging *just a teacher* mindset and replacing it with *teacher leader*.

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